

Restructured
a fool's relocation journey

1995-1997



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I

Introduction

I didn't see it coming.

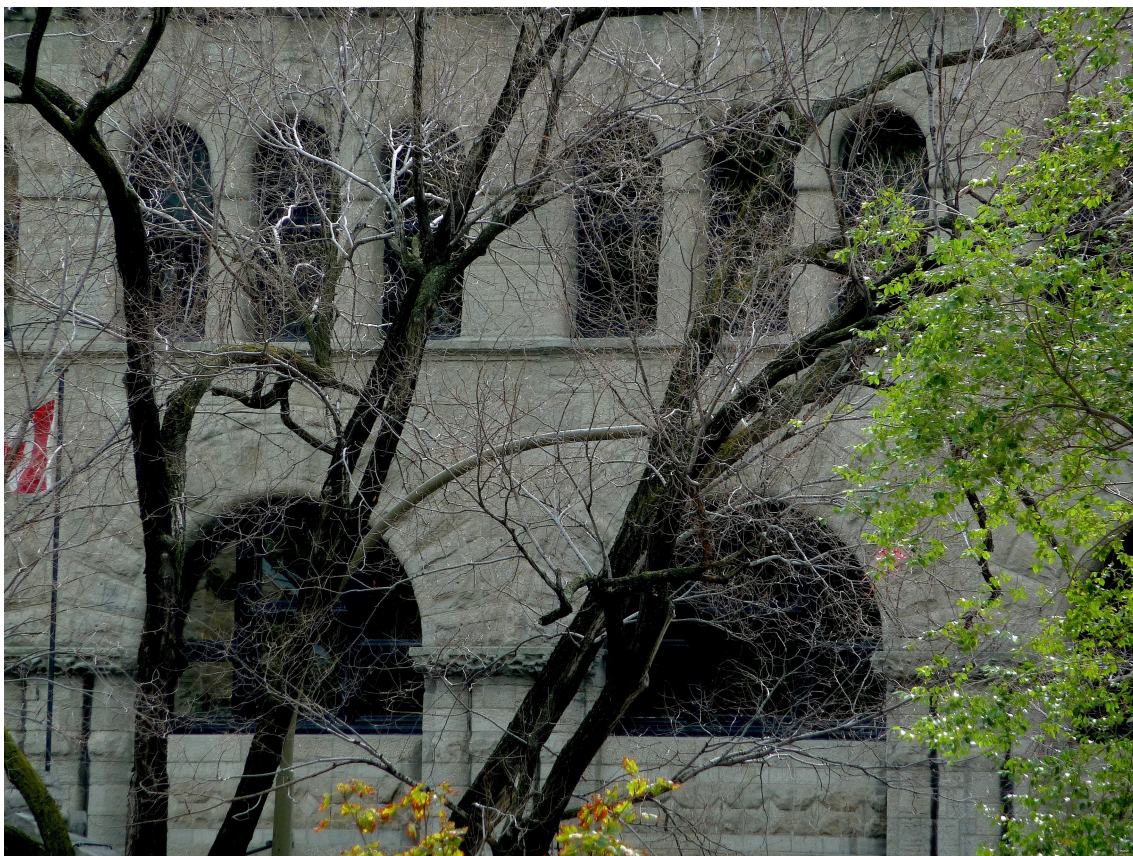
Relocation to Calgary from Montréal through the Canadian Pacific Railway was the last thing I expected. There were a few reasons for that. For one thing, I never wanted a career in business. Above and beyond personal preferences, the situation at the railway and the general economy made moving to Calgary unimaginable for me. The entire company was downsizing as well as moving its head office across the country, hemorrhaging employees in the process.

I worked in the corporate library (Business Information Services) the kind of "cost-centre" department that is always vulnerable to budget cuts at the best of times. On top of that, I was a temp who hadn't been part of the organization for very long. Even if my job was preserved I wouldn't move across the country for it – if the downsizing didn't get me the head office move would. Permanent employees, friends and colleagues were being picked off one by one and I assumed I'd be in line with them at UIC.

Life has a way of surprising you and I did end up relocating. It meant a new job, new city, new lifestyle, a separation from my spouse, selling a house I loved, leaving my friends and watching everything I had thought of as my life dissolve in a six month period. It was a drastic personal restructuring not only for me but for the 900 or so transferees affected by the largest corporate relocation in Canadian history. This story is shared by a lot of people in this country and the intersection of personal and collective experience has fascinated me from the beginning.

This small book began as a collection of vignettes sent to friends through the Internet. These vignettes have been edited for coherence and continuity but I hope I've preserved enough of the spontaneity of the original posts to convey what a corporate reorganization and relocation is like on a personal level; the ambivalence, the constant

pull between the exhilaration of adventure and pain of loss and the way mundane things become brand new. I have not written this a representative or employee of the railway. Instead, this memoir is meant to be an antidote to newspaper headlines, corporate propaganda and management case studies, and as an artifact of the professional world in 1997.



I

Windsor Station 1995

1

From behind, Montréal's regal Windsor Station, which was CPR's corporate head office from 1886 to 1996, is beached in quiet. You can imagine roses twining up its limestone walls, the ghostly face of William Cornelius Van Horne appearing in the windows, looking down at the city, at the battalions of people advancing downtown in formation, snow skirling across skeletal parking garages, cop cars foraging in winter camouflage, tow trucks trawling the shoulders of the road. The wolf-moan of wind through the badlands of the abandoned Queen's Hotel is the only sound able to infiltrate the station. Later the mid-winter moon will rise over it, full to its breaking point.

2

When I started at the CPR in 1993 it hadn't occurred to me that it was only a division (now a subsidiary) of a conglomerate – Canadian Pacific Limited (CPL). The railway has such a strong presence in Canada it's hard to imagine it having a parent. CPL takes up two pages in the Directory of International Business with holdings in transportation, waste services, energy, real estate and hotels. It is a national grey eminence, described in business literature as both a "sleeping giant" and "bellwether of the Canadian economy." Most people, however, either think of the transcontinental railway or they remember CP Air. Although I used to see freight trains every day, I forgot the CPR existed outside the pages of Pierre Berton.

The railway doesn't exist in Canada as a transportation business. Instead, it's a blend of corporate bastion, Canadian history and collective memory. For me, the CPR employee directory feels like a genealogy, containing every name I can think of from my life. Rather than researching the latest round of merger talks or acquisition bids, I was just as likely to wonder if G Adair, Roadmaster, Sudbury, is the same Greg Adair who used to kick me in high school biology class.

Windsor Station was built by architect Bruce Price in 1886, its walls imbued with railway glory, honouring God, King and Empire. But much of the station was made up of offices and corridors resembling any business from the 1950s and '60s, the kind of vortex where my friends' fathers disappeared every day of the week with their briefcases and newspapers. It's the kind of company I associate with my father's generation and I often felt twenty years younger than the people I passed in the corridors. In the concourse café I stood in line with men who look like my father, childhood neighbours, my parents' bowling and pinochle-playing friends, their bodies sheathed in grey suits, cigarette smoke wreathing their hands. They ordered "the Special," bantered about gold, cross-border shopping, decks they planned to add to their West Island houses. I can't think of these people as "men in the grey flannel suits" because I both know and don't know them the same way I knew and didn't know my father. It's also impossible to imagine them forming a national monolith.

Canadian Pacific Limited grew during the first wave of corporate mergers at the beginning of the century, consolidating hundreds of railway lines stitching the country in the 1890s, absorbing the real estate and mineral deposits that came with the trackage. The company bloated during the 1960s until a recession rolled in. Then it became clear no one knew how to make the behemoth work as company policy doesn't cover the laws of inertia. (Company policy does, however, forbid employees from sticking railway spikes up their noses.) Now in the 1990s, CP Ltd has divested itself of extraneous holdings, returning to a transportation and energy base.

Maps are not issued to new employees and the corridors of Windsor Station wound like miles of underground passages, low ceilings and twilit walls enclosing me. I couldn't believe I was only trying to find the personnel office and wasn't one of the Romanovs looking for escape routes through a besieged palace. I was shadowed on lost stairwells by couriers in cobwebby spandex who looked as if they had spend the last twenty years searching for the research department, bearing faded packages they couldn't return to FedEx.

A full-length portrait of George Stephen, CP's first president, marked the presidential suite and I imagined cigar-puffing magnates gazing into crystal brandy decanters, conjuring the great artery of transportation. Here was where the Elders of Windsor Station composed their protocols, "What is good for the CPR is good for Canada," "one of the GREATEST and MOST PRODIGIOUS ENTERPRISES this world has ever known."

No matter what time of day, the concealed lighting of the corridor felt like the waning hours of an afternoon, reminding me there was a time when the sun never set on the British Empire. I imagined the smell of steam and creosote as William Cornelius Van Horne marched into the mahogany trenches of Windsor Station, sunlight forging chevrons through the chink in the curtains, meeting length measured out in two or three cigars. A curt greeting, a pithy bon mot, a call to order, members of the Syndicate scattering to their seats like quail breaking cover.

Outside, trees were being girdled off the planet, streets plugged with telegraph poles. Rain drove nails into the ground, turning streets into quagmires of mud and horseshit. Daylight was unable to compete with gristmills driving trip-hammers and furnace bellows, sparks lunging from grindstones, the eternal flame of iron foundries. Steamboats entered the port like floating theatres, bearing American ready-mades for the country's newly recruited settlers, enticed by CPR ad campaigns, their destinations determined from Van Horne's Windsor Station eyrie.

On Remembrance Day everyone in the station wore a poppy and greeted each other like relatives gathered in a funeral parlour. Christmas was taken even more seriously. A ceiling-high tree in the middle of the concourse sheltering tastefully wrapped presents for a local charity, the Wagnerian carols, the lights glowing like late night stars along the ribcage of the station were all traditions in a corporate production of Christmas. It was hard to believe there are actually employees who don't celebrate this holiday.

But CP has always been in the dream business and minorities have always been subsumed into this dream. Men of British and Scottish origin wrote memoirs and journals as the CPR was a Robert Louis Stevenson adventure. Engineers compared themselves to the Trojans, seeing Progress and Civilization in iron bridges, matchstick trestles hovering midway between heaven and earth. Chinese, Indigenous peoples, "Celts, Teutons, Latins, Slavs, Mongolians and Hybrids" were mentioned in passing in these memoirs, their contributions to the Great Railway slipped into obscure paragraphs.

Very little was said about the "CPR army," the guys with Number 2 shovels, steel-toed boots, two-way radios to prevent them from getting lost in the yards, track guys wrestling three hundred pound draw bars into submission while blizzards whistled through cracks in the roundhouse wall. Some pensioners told me their fathers' and grandfathers' stories about the railway as if they were their own memories; pre-union days of roadmasters press-ganging immigrants, drifters, criminals and "navvies" into service. These crews toiled the line for their dollar a day or were fired on the spot. Like all other back-breaking physical labour, right down to serfs dragging the bricks to build the pyramids, erecting Stonehenge or the Easter Island moai, the "operations teams" who actually had to build the Great Railway are invisible, forgotten or their work is credited to extraterrestrials.

What remains in the CP canon is the evening sun biting the tops off the Rockies, white tents circling a fire, rugged men toasting the "jolly CPR" as the obligatory creek boils in the foreground. Displayed in corporate and national archives, and reproduced for CP hotel gift shops are John Fraser's sketches, redrawn by WC Van Horne to ensure the Rockies were majestic enough to impress CPR's London office. These Gothic vistas,

modernist trains and wholesome blond tourists were carefully chosen to present a Nordic ideal.

The past at the CPR is so strong the company has trouble projecting a current identity. Like some countries, Greece and Egypt and the UK come to mind, no one is interested in the railway's current state of affairs. At Windsor Station, the radiant tree, packaged charity and bombastic hymns seemed designed to conceal the emptiness of a concourse where no trains arrive any more.

5

The CPR can't make a move without arousing the country. Every decision it makes causes small town councils to mass in public squares, torches and pitchforks raised against the railway cabal which would abandon them. Editorialists throughout Canadian history have thundered jeremiads against the company at one time or another. Alan Fotheringham in *Maclean's* is merely the latest voice. Pierre Berton shook his venerable head over the company's selling out to the Americans for putting the stars and stripes on its newest old logo – which has since been scrapped. Nostalgic shows about cross-country rail journeys appear on television, climaxing to Gordon Lightfoot's *Canadian Railway Trilogy*. Shippers howl monopoly. The company is even the subject of a joke. A farmer's crops are destroyed by a tornado and his wife runs off with a travelling salesman. He looks up at the sky, shakes his fist and shouts, "God damn the CPR."

But Windsor Station continued to magnetize tourists. Everyday they entered the concourse, wondering what happened to the trains, where the vaulted waiting room went and what happened to the restaurant, best in the city. People snapped photos of the statue of the angel bearing a dying serviceman to heaven. Children reached up to touch the coffee-coloured icon of Lord Mount Stephen, still standing upright in his sandcastle Kremlin. Wistful men in twenty year old suits would ambush me by "The Canadian" barbershop wanting to know what happened to the Alouette Room, unable to accept – or imagine – I had never heard of it. All I could do was stand aside like an emcee in the make-belief ballroom of the concourse, steeped in the magic lantern light filtering through the ceiling.

Travelling on December 24th I am a fragment of light in the glittering life line between Montréal and Toronto. Red lights undulate up one side of the highway while on the other side a caravan of gold appears over the rise, a Silk Road of travellers heading east. Along the good-for-nothing-one outside Kingston, snowflakes strike the windshield. Tracks slide of the edge into oceanic fields. Stuck tow trucks are locked to stalled suburban vans while Brockville twinkles like a forlorn carnival in the dark distance. It is always here where drivers slow to a creep, four-ways flashing a cautionary tale. With a flick of a wrist these prophets signal to the rest of us sinners that life is temporal on a night like this in Eastern Ontario.

Office buildings near Toronto glow like radio tubes. Crossing the Simcoe County line, the highway is flayed by wind, with no Eastern Ontarians to keep me on the straight and narrow. Traffic slows until my fate is linked with Audis and Hondas from Toronto, pick-ups and farm vehicles from the rural towns. Trees are twisted into bonsai shapes by the crosswinds, distant pines frozen in hieratic beauty. The Barrie Race Track stands sphinx like with its lettering half-concealed, a new identity assigned by the snow.

Reaching my home town, I turn down the road curving around the open wound of the bay. At the end of it, the brown boxcars with the snow plough on the front end are parked on the track; the beginning and end of my memory. Like the tourists entering Windsor Station, I don't think of the ruthless old days of the CPR, its stranglehold over the country, its role in government, the crushing of the Riel Rebellion. I don't even think of the upcoming lay-offs although I'll be first out the door. Criticism becomes elegy. Skepticism shifts to nostalgia until all I really know is that the image of this train, sidelined in snow has been imprinted in the carbon of my memory.

I stop and wonder if my entire childhood, my town, my country is a CPR invention, a page out of Van Horne's sketchbook, the assets page from George Stephen's annual report, the sum total of tax breaks from the government; a corporate production even larger than Christmas. In this neck of the woods it's difficult to remember that the CPR isn't this slumbering train, but like all other corporations, has a headquarters to cover the machinations of business. It also has a hierarchical structure

as complicated and impregnable as the family tree of European royalty at the turn of the century. The only time I can keep that in mind is when I'm standing behind Windsor Station, imagining George Stephen's face in the half-moon windows.

II

Downsizing

1

January 1996 was a wretched month for the company. The holiday season rolled back, leaving hundreds of employees not knowing if they had jobs, or if those jobs were being transferred to Calgary. Windsor Station became a decaying ducal palace full of closed doors and intrigue. Research departments huddled in their tower. Engineers struck conspiratorial poses in the concourse buffet. Human resources specialists surveyed their kingdom. The station simmered with arcane alliances and feuds, princes and emissaries, wicked queens, Machiavellian manipulators, malicious gossips and court poisoners. It was hard to imagine much railway business going on, but the shareholders seemed content.

Days, weeks passed. No news. Life went on. I watched people move as one organism off the commuter train then disperse, disappearing one by one into office buildings. I wondered how many of those people would be on the streets in six months and how many would vanish in downsizing rapture. Because I was so sure I would lose it, I cherished the act of going into work. Early in the morning the city has an underwater quality until the sky lightens, shimmers across glass towers.

While waiting for my pink slip, I listened a lot to a song, "What If God Were One of Us." I went for a Tarot card reading, hoping someone could see a future. Yes, I wanted to hear about unforeseen riches and success. Occasionally when motivated I pawed through the career books at the Coles bookstore on the corner, exchanging wry glance with other CP employees looking for jobs in all the wrong places. I seethed, as many of us did, over blighted aspirations and the humiliation of seeing one's fate determined by a few soul-shrivelled, salary-sucking pinheads.

Management pundits gurgled on about downsizing being a time for new opportunities and developing outside interests. However, the only jobs in the newspaper Careers section were for information services (computer) specialists – and directors. There were no new opportunities in IS for me unless I could quickly find my inner computer genius. As for being a director, one apparently needs a nebulous advanced degree and a previous position as a director. Missed it by that much. But there were always outside interests. I could learn how to paint watercolours in the dark when my electricity was cut off.

It was, and still is, beyond me what benefits stress, helplessness, repressed emotion and operational paralysis do for a company. It also seems obvious that people who can't count on having a job can't buy houses or cars, take vacations, give their children an education or contribute to any sort of national economy. It would take a lot of Cold War brainwashing to convince me that CEOs deserve million dollar bonuses for rooting out deadbeats like us, whose salaries have apparently caused the downfall of western civilization.

2

In the end-times light of late afternoon, the Business Information Services department looked like an outpost cut loose from a crumbling empire. My clients were being especially nice to me but it was a doomed kind of nice. One of my favourites, WP, who worked in Research & Operational Development, came in to track down a couple of elusive volumes of the AREA Bulletin. He was a marked man, in a department directly under the downsizing knife. While we were ostensibly hunting down the bulletins, WP pulled out a newspaper and pointed out a photograph of his little daughter getting her face painted at a museum. As we talked it became obvious he didn't care about finding the bulletins at all.

Another customer from the same department entered and all we did was browse through newspaper careers sections. "Thank you for everything," he said. It sounded like a final statement and I protested, "I haven't done anything." He ducked his head and scuttled out the door. Later that week I received an anonymous basket of flowers

with a card thanking me for my “unfailing kindness and efficiency.” The word “efficiency tipped me off as to who it was, but CPR instinct told me not to acknowledge the gift. Thanking this gentleman would have been embarrassing for both of us. It was as if people were preparing for the inevitable by saying goodbye in the only ways they knew how.

The view from the trenches was interesting. I could see from the bottom the breakdown in relationships, new alliances formed, last minute sucking up. Some people constantly talked about restructuring while others remained tight as clams. Whatever division or cohesion already existing within any given department was magnified a thousandfold. The endemic secrecy of the company made matters worse, creating an environment ripe for rumours and odd outbursts from reserved people who barely said good morning to me. Everything was on hold. No one knew where the cuts were going to come, or at what level. Everyday became the same, moribund, silent except for the click of the roulette wheel spinning above our heads.

I imagined the calm before the outbreak of war. At lunch I walked up rue Stanley, thinking that only a Viennese café would suit the current mood of Windsor Station: a genuine fin-de-siècle Viennese café in dark green and ochre, overlooking the Danube. I wanted to open a door and enter a lost paradise of freshly cut flowers, hear an endless waltz, tulip-necked lamps on every wrought-iron table. I would sit by the window and gaze at the lindens and row of sphinxes along the Platz while brooding over my impending unemployment. Women would mingle, slender as lilies and shadowy as if they had slipped out of a daguerrotype; the city a dream, fading, even while I was dreaming it. I settled for a Van Houtte café and a croissant.

As soon as I made it into my workplace I saw the managers scuttling around in a cloak-and-dagger manner. They disappeared into the office, which had become a bunker over the past month. An hour later the office door opened. B entered the office. Twenty minutes later the door opened again and B emerged. She left at noon and that was the last time I saw B. Next, S entered the office. Once again the door closed and then opened, ejecting S. An afternoon meeting was called to divide up B's duties. E was being stuck with them. Later G confronted me at the newspaper shelves and ranted at me about how loyal E was, and how terrible it was that she was being stuck with so much extra work. The implication was that I had somehow emerged scot-free. G didn't realize so much work had been piled on me over the last few months I couldn't take on anything more, not if anyone actually wanted the work to be done.

The next day H and G were laid off, leaving four of us to staff the department. E was clinging as tightly as she could to CP. I knew I had my job until the fall when the department would move to Calgary. It wouldn't be made permanent, so that ended any fear or speculation I had about moving. I felt relieved, a weight lifted. E asked if she could apply for my job in Calgary even though it wasn't permanent and said she was willing to move without a company relocation package. She had already arranged a loan from her father. I would have given anything at that moment to be able to give her the job. All I could say was that I was happy to hear she was applying for my job and I really hoped she got it.

As expected, the Research and Operations Development department was decimated. As I roamed the February-grey streets, avoiding pot holes, trying to keep from dropping to the underworld through construction pits, I wondered if there was any future anywhere for an unrepentant humanities major who still believed in research, libraries, information dissemination and public service. Whether to keep bread on the table one had to sell out every ideal and become a corporate flack. As the body count in the station rose it occurred to me that Kafka was an optimist. But underneath the anger I was worried. The kinds of jobs I was qualified for were disappearing and I was no longer able to rely on a safety net of contract positions. I had no severance package and no career to rebuild. At lunch it was impossible not to notice yet another homeless

person lying like a crumpled starfish in Place Bonaventure. I tried convincing myself I was sitting on a gold mine of transferable skills. I rewrote my resumé using terms like “process innovation.”

4

Caught deep in another endless afternoon, three Kens came into the library looking for the same annual report, hounded by three directors named Terry, in turn tailed by the VPs named Scott. I felt myself detach, almost as if I were levitating over the ziggurat holding the CD-ROMs, the cost and business codices, the peaks and valleys of stock prices, dark green range of Moody’s, the Stonehenge of the International Directory of Business. I felt as if I had already half-left the company and I pictured the Kens, Terrys and Scotts chasing me with butterfly nets, one of the Scotts bellowing, “Company policy does not permit employees to fly, levitate or otherwise transubstantiate during business hours.”

Around 2:30, the whole office suite seemed to be growing dimmer. No one had come in to replace the Kens and Terrys and I sat at my post like a lighthouse keeper. The phone rang and I grabbed it, hoping someone needed or wanted some business research. It was the manager of the Employee Communications department, asking if I could see him upstairs. Happy to be sprung I raced up the stairs to the fifth floor. He and D ushered me into a conference room. It was a job offer; permanent, full-time status, related to my degree in English and best of all, entry into a professional career. The salary was higher than Business Information could have offered had my job there been made permanent. The new job would be in the Gulf Canada Square building – in Calgary.

They had to call 911 to pry my jaw off the table. I hadn’t know the job existed and had rarely dealt with anyone from that particular department. It was clear to me that the gods of restructuring had nothing to do that day and decided to zap the first temp who crossed the concourse. “Here. You. You’re going to Calgary. Why? Because we’re the gods of restructuring and you’re not.” The wheel of fortune finally stopped spinning for me and all I could think of was the first two panels of a “Peanuts” cartoon,

Snoopy typing his endless novel on the roof of his doghouse: “Everything was calm and peaceful. All of a sudden it happened.”

I was going to Calgary.

I was going to be part of the largest corporate relocation in Canadian history.

Dear Marsha and John. Stop. I’m going to Calgary. Stop.

New job, new department, new city, new life.

The first thing I did after receiving the job offer was stagger into a nearby Treats and blubber at the clerk, “Holy shit. I’m moving to Calgary.” Then I returned to the office, called my partner and sang the theme from “Bonanza.” Later on the 211 bus I had the opportunity to give him the gory details. Neither of us spoke for a long time. We looked around, at all the lucky people who didn’t have to think about Calgary, anywhere but at each other. Both of us knew it would mean a separation for an indefinite period of time. Finally we both said at the same time, “I/You can’t turn it down.”

III

Changes

1

Changes began before I even set foot in Calgary. Not keen on playing the role of Job-Stealing Temp, I couldn't face the people who were being laid off. In the concourse I saw a woman who had been at CP for eighteen years crying and embracing her friends. It was her last day. She had started at the company when she turned eighteen. Although she wasn't qualified for the job I was offered I felt like a traitor. I wanted to do something to relieve my guilt feelings – stand up for my friends and turn the company down flat. I thundered imaginary speeches in which I declared that the restructuring was sadistic and arbitrary and I wouldn't sell out my friends or my city, Montréal. Needless to add, the executives rose to their feet after my impassioned speech and vowed to hire everybody back. The shareholders, chastened, slunk off to tobacco companies.

I didn't think I had changed but people's perceptions of me certainly did. It seemed that when I accepted the job offer I had also chosen sides. I wasn't just new to a job, I was new to an entire lifestyle. Bankers and real estate agents stopped laughing at me. Mortgage portals slid open as I now possessed the secret password: a permanent corporate job. People in my life drifted into two camps. Some thought I had finally come to my senses by accepting a "real" job. Others thought I had been lobotomized. I was surprised by the support I received from acquaintances and the grief I got from close friends. One of my university friends told me I was selling out to become a corporate stooge. Another friend said, "Let me get this straight. You're leaving your partner and moving across the country for a *job*. The end of the world must be near." By contrast, one of my research clients congratulated me and said, "Of course you're going. You should break open the champagne."

When I switched jobs from Business Information Services to Corporate Communications I learned a lot about work and pay scales. It's hard to accept exactly how much the work I had done was undervalued. The simple truth is that a nebulous job scrying into a computer monitor pays better than tutoring, research and library work, all meaningful jobs that help people in concrete ways.

Although complaining about a job opportunity makes me sound like a bad winner there are a lot of good things about being a temp. In my experience places that hire temps are usually overwhelmed and genuinely appreciate your presence. You make not make the most money but you have freedom. You also get to stand on a moral high ground as temps aren't implicated in events like lay-offs. Instead you're seen as an underdog and you meet the most interesting people in an organization. To be honest, I'm more comfortable in the trenches with other temps than I am trying to stay awake at meetings or pretending I fit in a department full of men who have worked and socialized together for years.

2

I also learned how much the railway industry, and the CPR in particular, meant to both English and French Montrealers. The feelings of loss in the community over the lay-offs and head office move cut deep. "It's confederation," said a friend who staunchly supported Québec independence. "Van Horne, the Last Spike, when Montréal was a great city." "Anyone who didn't go to university went into the railways," my neighbour said wistfully. "My mother used to take us to Windsor Station and we always dressed in our Sunday best like we were going to church," said another neighbour.

Everyone agreed it was the end of an era. The CPR's downsizing and move were especially sharp blows coming after the October 30th referendum, heightening a prevailing feeling that the foundation of Canada was collapsing. Everyone knew someone who worked for the railway and this gave personal focus to fears about the future. What happens to a city when a formative part of its history leaves as if the city has no relevance to it? And what happens when there are no more places to work?

As news continued to break at Windsor Station and more people filled in their relocation forms, old hierarchies began to melt. No mean feat since CP Railway Company is a conservative institution dating back to the British empire. Since starting I had sensed a bred-in-the-bone reserve, verging on secrecy. It was an anomaly in other ways; and English company in Montréal, an island on an island with an isolated world-onto-its-own quality. The move changed its atmosphere. This would be the largest corporate relocation in Canadian history, involving 900 employees, 700 or so from Montréal, administrative staff, professionals of all levels as well as executives.

Ordinary Joes were scheduling homesearch trips to Calgary, dealing with human resources bureaucracy, picking up airline tickets, filling out expense claims for the first times in their lives. Everyone had personal issues to contend with because of the move. One man's older children flatly refused to go. Another man was worried about his francophone wife finding a job in Calgary and it looked likely he'd end up going alone. Suddenly people I had only passed in the corridors had wives, husbands, children, aging parents, homes they loved and for a brief time, the personal transcended our positions and the endemic secrecy of the company.

What developed was another sort of division between employees: those who were going and those who weren't. There was a "born again" quality to the relocation proceedings. The Chosen were "Alberta bound." It was like a Baptist revival, only with Calgary substituting for Heaven. The Chosen people received relocation reports in the mail like evangelical pamphlets. People who had gone out early to Calgary reported back like pioneer scouts and an e-mail called "Grapevine," which contained information addressed exclusively to relocating employees, was transmitted to the entire company. To the true believers Calgary was the land of Milk and Honey. The refrains started sounding like spirituals. "We'll start that service up again when we're all together in Calgary." The large numbers of francophones and women who were not transferring could only feel even more marginalized.

I learned what happens to a company when loyal people are laid off. Companies lose a lot of local knowledge when they lay off the people who have social networks, history, memory and local knowledge. Simple procedures become chaotic. Vast amounts of time are spent reinventing the wheel. Companies also become lonelier

places and I felt as if I wasn't part of the same organization. All of the propaganda about the "new CP Rail" made me miss the old one. When companies cut the people who hold their histories, those who don't quite fit into the corporate image and the long time loyalists, they end up with more conformity and competition. The people who are left are like me: young, anxious to prove ourselves and not inclined to rock the boat, especially on their way to a new city. This means there is less humanity to leaven a work day, no more friendly faces, or people who are simply comfortable and capable at their jobs.

3

I learned exactly how much it costs for a woman to do something men do all the time: relocate to another part of the country because of a job. My partner wasn't about to quit his job and follow me to Calgary. His reasons were valid. He was working full-time and also going to school part-time at McGill University. The University of Calgary didn't offer his program and it didn't make sense for him to quit his job, pay tuition and commute to Edmonton to finish his program.

Yet I couldn't honestly say if the positions were reversed that I wouldn't have quit school and moved with him. I was, and still am, envious of his resolve. I didn't have anywhere near the same kind of support or resources as relocating men and families. Very few events were organized for single people, especially women. At the time I only knew one other woman who was moving to Calgary and leaving a partner behind.

My relationship with my partner changed. To begin with, money is power and I had a lot more of it. For the first time in my life I had the weight of a company behind me. I was the employee, the transferee; he was spouse. It was amusing to stare down bankers, movers, notaries, real estate agents and saying, "I'm the transferee," then blowing on my imaginary six-shooters as they looked flustered and apologized. Where once my partner and I could joke, issues became serious. "I'm packing my bags and hitting the rails" was no longer amusing.

Neither could deal honestly with my new paycheque. He tried to take control in other, underhanded ways and I buried my head in the sand and clung to the past. Common marital snags can't be easily worked out over thousand kilometre distances. Phone companies notwithstanding, you can't reach out and touch. The impending move cast a constant sense of impermanence over the relationship. A year or two is a long time to be apart. Instead of being a rock in my life the relationship became as uncertain and fraught as the relocation itself.

One evening F said in an ominous voice, "If you don't take the job I'll be very angry." I had no intention of turning it down and was surprised and resentful at this pronouncement. Many people, especially women and francophones turned down jobs in Calgary because of their families and relationships. Relocation involved moving thousands of miles to a city that didn't appeal to me and where I didn't know anyone. I had to give up a house and city I love, trips to the ocean, seeing the people who are my life-blood for a job that was a huge question mark. But if I turned it down F would be "Very Angry."

It was a no-win situation and one example of how our relationship went that summer. But in all fairness there was nothing F could have said to make the situation better. If he had once said he would miss me or even hinted he didn't want me to go, I might have lost my courage. On the other hand, I had the distinct feeling he didn't care. One night I cleaned out the cat box, forgot to replace the litter and wondered why Boris and Natasha were marching around making speeches at me. I put a frozen chicken in the cupboard instead of the freezer. I wondered if I was having a nervous breakdown. On good days I did feel Chosen and yes, loyal to the company. I was young, alive, a fool on the brink of her journey. I was striking a blow for temps, for feminism, for taking chances. On bad days I felt like a desperate migrant trundling my earthly possessions across the dustbowl, following a job I knew nothing about and just hoping it would all work out somehow.

IV

Homesearch

1

When it was time to take the homesearch trip provided by the company, I had the usual eastern stereotypes of Calgary. People wore Stetsons, line dancing was mandatory, red meat quotas were enforced by the Alberta Beef Police, museums were run by pig farmers. I'd have to unlearn the metric system. Poor people were deported to Vancouver. Worst of all, I'd be living in a land-locked province next door to Montana, the militia boys and the Aryan Nations.

Needless to say, Calgary is a much more complex city than that. Upon arrival, the first thing that struck me was the border of distant mountains, a ghostly embroidery of white against a vast robin's egg sky. The wide open spaces around the airport and the floating vision of mountains made me feel as if I had come to the end of the world. Then when the taxi approached downtown Calgary, office towers suddenly rose like uncorked genies into the sky. Downtown Calgary is a collection of head office towers squeezed together, with nothing old or historical to dilute them. The constantly mirror and reflect each other as there is no crumbling brick, wood or stone to calm them down. It's the kind of place space aliens might set up as a replica of a city; born yesterday, suddenly appearing fully formed out of prairie sea.

F and I were set up in a large very beige suite in the Royal George Hotel in downtown Calgary. We're used to pitching a tent or camping out in the back of the car, and it was an effort for me to remember to collect receipts for my expense account. Picture a half-baked grad student/Gen X slacker with an expense account. I sat in taxis and restaurants, requesting receipts, feeling rich and eccentric. I pursed my lips while considering the bill, working out the tip while imagining I was swathed in furs, dribbling jewelry.

I had never felt more foreign to a city than I did while walking down Stephen Avenue one morning. “Red River Valley blared from an enormous ghetto blaster. Beside it a man stood pigeon-breasted, singing along in an operatic voice. Farther up the street another man played “Greensleeves.” While I paused in front of the plaster horse in front of the Grand Saddlery a street cleaner scuttled by in a little vehicle with a giant cowboy hat affixed to it and a “Bon jour” scrawled on the side. Many areas, like 17th Avenue, reminded me of the southwestern United States. Then very abruptly the city fans out into a hinterland of railyards and grain feed co-ops, showing its prairie side. Wherever I went in Calgary I found myself rummaging in my pockets for American money.

2

We met our real estate agent and embarked on the quest. My mission, since I had decided to accept it, was to buy a house in a week. Although I was a tourist in Calgary I entered houses, looked at people’s intimate belongings. I looked at neighbourhoods I had never seen and had to judge whether or not I could live in them. Not that I had a lot of choice. Housing prices are more expensive in Calgary than they are in Montréal and at my price range there was no brick, no maple trees and no Cape Cod cottages. Instead, I entered countless stucco bungalows that reminded me of the houses strung along the San Andreas fault in California. Make-do houses for refugees, seasonal workers, gamblers, high school kids trapped in shot-gun marriages. The fears poured out. I would be fired, I would be foreclosed on, I would be left high and dry in a wretched bungalow with stinky shag carpeting and suicide-brown linoleum. My real estate agent assured me that everyone hit the same kind of low point. I’ve developed a whole new respect for that profession, by the way. A good agent is absolutely invaluable in a move like this.

I had to come to terms with the fact that Calgary is completely different from the east and start from that premise. Everything, the high dry geography, the magpies, the angle of the sun, not to mention that dancing border of mountains was a reminder that I was in the west, and the west is a socio-political-geographic state. Businessmen in restaurants casually referred to Houston, Texas. I shivered when I heard weather reports for Kamloops and Jasper. I wasn't sure when, or if, I would ever get used to the sheer geography of Alberta, a Calgary-Seattle-Dallas corridor or TV stations broadcasting from Spokane, Washington. It was only after I stopped looking for what I had in the east that I was able to open my mind enough to compile a short list.

Gunrack House: split-level, beige stucco exterior with faux Tudor beams. Good bathroom. Large gun cupboard in the basement, which was being sold as a desirable accessory. This same house featured a rack of hunting knives in the master bedroom, instantly accessible as it was mounted on the wall right beside the bed. I didn't want to know. Later in the evening we returned to the house and cruised along the gravel lane behind the house. In the neighbouring garage were men, beer and Harleys. I struck the house off my list.

Jacuzzi House: satellite dish and dream bathroom. In fact, the entire house was built around this Louis XIV Jacuzzi. Meanwhile, the bedrooms were tiny, overstuffed vassals to the Jacuzzi. Lowered blinds gave the house a muted, X-Files feeling. It had bad vibes and I couldn't imagine living there.

Alberni House: a steal for vampires. The main level was dull and oppressive, veldts of harvest gold and brown. But the basement was beautiful, containing a master bedroom, painted white with French doors leading into an ensuite bathroom with a Jacuzzi, walk-in movie star closet. But the reversal of upstairs/downstairs was too much for me. I would feel like Dracula sleeping in a crypt.

Fairview Crescent: I had a feeling this would be my house. It had a huge picture window, shining hardwood floors and softly painted walls. It was a bungalow but full of light and an impression of space. And the lay-out reminded me of my apartment on King-Edward in Montréal. I could see myself living there and I figured it could be fixed up and resold easily if I needed to do that. F and I made an offer to purchase and it came in at the same price as what we paid for the house in Dorval. This felt like a good

omen. I felt a sense of accomplishment having done exactly what I set out to do right on budget. I would not need the CP subsidy. I was not beholden to the company. I could get out of this situation, free myself any time.

My real estate agents deserved a lot of credit. They very quickly picked up the subtext of the purchase, new job, F not coming out for at least a year. They knew as well as I did that anything can happen in a year and they didn't waste my time with anything I couldn't afford, maintain or re-sell by myself.

The normally excruciating process of buying a house moved on fast-forward. The house inspector passed it and we spend the rest of the day at the bank signing mortgage papers. It was weird how effortless the procedure was and how differently (i.e., respectfully) I was treated by the mortgage officer because I was connected to the famous CP Rail relocation. My memories of banks include interrogations, condescending looks from guys in grey suits and having to drag my father in as a co-signer for a small car loan. Now I was in a banker's office, unsure of my new job title, without a work phone number or office number. I had no business card or any written proof I had the job. In fact, I hadn't signed any paper forms at all for CP. All I had done was accept the offer through the company's e-mail system. But instead of calling security the mortgage officer treated me like a VIP. CP Rail struck again.

All I knew about the house we just bought was that it's in the southeast district of Calgary. There's a bus stop a few blocks away and presumably a bus will show up and take me downtown in the mornings. Like everyone else I took pictures of the house to show my cohorts at Windsor Station. We gathered around and exchanged photos of our new houses like baby pictures.

F and I took the obligatory trip to Banff, Lake Louise and Bow Valley Park. Spring had come late to Alberta and Lake Louise was just melting so we only caught glimpses of its blue-green glacial water. The lake is beautiful but looks so composed. Downy snow lies in the crook between two mountains just above a perfectly shaped lake. I discovered how all-pervasive the CPR is out west. Half of the historical plaques contain information that came from CPR's corporate archives. Many of the mountains and ranges were named after explorers and surveyors connected with the railway. It couldn't get much more Canadian (or colonial) than this: working for the CPR and moving west with the railway.

Moraine Lake is wilder, a wealth of colours and textures; roughness of ancient avalanche paths, bands of green-blue water, bone-white branches, stones dyed a deep indigo. The shore crackles underfoot. Rock is alive here; layers of time and history compressed into patterns, colours, layers. Clouds stealth over the mountains creating fluid avalanches that suddenly leech the colour out of the world. Along the road to Bow Valley Park, a mountain loomed in front of us like a Gothic castle. The mountains give a feeling of aloneness, entirely different from loneliness. When I looked at them I could think, "Yes, I can make it. This is my adventure, my future." I stood facing the Rockies, humbled yet uplifted, as if offering them all I am now and all I can or will be.

V

Moving

1

The bulbs I had planted in the fall detonated in the spring. The magnificent blue spruce released its pollen, little brown cases dropping off to reveal tender new needles. The little pine shrub I was afraid wouldn't make it through the winter was covered in new needles like a fuzzy baby duckling. Hostas swirled. The perennials doubled in size and they marched across the garden, crazed with chlorophyll, none willing to yield. Our pea tree grew on its own schedule. Long after every other pea tree had its canopy of leaves, ours remained bare and gnarly. When we first bought the house I thought it was dead. However, long after every other pea tree lost its leaves ours remained green. A night owl and eccentric; I loved this tree. This year the beauty of the house and my garden of curmudgeons gutted me. I couldn't even conceive of leaving them.

2

At Windsor Station, starting the new job did nothing to reassure me about anything. Trying to get my bearings in the new office suite was like trying to go scuba diving without an oxygen tank. All of the doors looked the same, like tall Hershey bars, and I kept sliding into the wrong room by mistake. The corridor was so dim people looked like dream figures. To keep my bearings I had to remember that the pink picture at one end of the hall led to the concourse, the orange one led to the exit staircase. I felt even more like a captive Romanov.

Around five o'clock on my first day I tried to leave the offices by taking a back staircase. I opened the door the wrong way and the bar on it crashed down. Someone pulled it open and I literally skidded out the door, ending up in the middle of a directors' smoking party. Directors, and my ex-clients.

"Gotcha," said one of the directors.

“Urk,” I replied with my usual pose.

These directors regularly pose at this entrance for their smoke: Wild Directors of the Serengetti, all wearing sunglasses, pale blue shirts, red patterned ties and beige dockers. Dockers are ubiquitous in the business world. Instead of scuttling past them, I hung out with them for ages, talking about the relocation. Since the reorganization old hierarchies had melted down and the oddest groups of people could be seen together. Since everyone was moved around you couldn’t assume anyone was with the same department, or doing the same kind of work.

My new office was a long room consisting of a suite of work stations with high beige partitions. No one in Communications worked in this office any more, except me, in the very back corner. This was the Land that Time Forgot, a graveyard of old reports, newsletters, communiques dating back to the Big Bang. Most employees had already started the great move and I felt like the ghost of Windsor Station roaming the corridors, rattling my chains, walking through the wrong doors when I wasn’t walking into them.

I was beginning a new job at the exact point where everything in the station was ending. No one cared what I did or if I was still alive; they were moving their own offices and families to Calgary. Every so often I glimpsed someone scuttling between the doors. The communications department was scattered all over the first floor of the station, obviously making for highly effective communication. Early in the morning I could hear one of the doors open, footsteps, then I smelled cigarette smoke, usually accompanied by a muffled litany of sports score. Place at the back corner I never saw anyone enter or leave the suite, and I shrugged at the thought of phantoms congregating for a smoke.

The office suite looked as if it had gone through an emergency evacuation. The work stations of those who were laid off remained untouched. Manuals, diskettes, unfinished work lay beside slumbering monitors. Meanwhile at my exciting new job, horrible people called my work phone number and shouted at me in French. Who were these people and why were they calling this number? I didn’t know. They spoke to quickly and angrily for me to find a way in. I wondered if I had a tie line to a mental hospital. This seemed completely unsurprising. Clouds massed, loading up for another

daily afternoon storm, the tail end of Hurricane Bertha. The stone of the station darkened to match the sky. Rain nailed the ground, trees were tempest toss'd, clouds roiled in best Gothic tradition.

I decided to look at this situation as a test. I was demoralized and had terrible feelings of foreboding. I had ruined my entire life for this. Once upon a time I had too much work to do and was reasonably competent at it. There was a time when I helped people and they appreciated my help. That was then. Now I had no idea what I was even supposed to be doing. I was not a child of the universe, I had no right to be here. You can't see infinity in a grain of sand. I got through the days pretending I was a POW and I couldn't be broken.

I was strongly tempted to tape my own signs over the "Special Communications" plaque on the door of Room 135, a different one for each day of the week: Abandon Hope Ye Who Enter Here; Mad Hatter's Tea Party; Smoking Room; Bomb Shelter; Gormenghast; City Morgue; Twilight Zone; Bedlam. I changed my email signature to read, "This is all very CP-esque – F Kafka." No one noticed.

3

In preparation for Calgary I embarked on something hazardous, unethical and insane: driving lessons. All my life I have walked or taken public transit to get from Point A to B. I actually like public transit although like everyone else I complain about it constantly. I don't have to worry about smashing into another car because some jerk is tailgating or cutting me off. On a bus or train I can read, eavesdrop on conversations and watch all the suckers stalled in their cars. Bad weather days on transit have a festive quality about them. There's something almost jolly about a crush of Montrealers on transit during a blizzard.

But I have started the lessons and find nothing enjoyable about motoring around in tiny cars with fascists who bark at you when you blink the wrong way. It's a different world on the opposite side of the windshield. My instructor's name was Gustavo but I

renamed him Gestapo. He reminded me of a merciless Zen master. I could imagine him saying, “You must turn with the hand-over-hand method, your hands at ten o’clock and two o’clock, or you can never achieve enlightenment.” Whack! He spoke in riddles and conundrums.

“You must learn to relax behind the wheel. Your motions must flow. Why do you want to jerk the car to the right?”

“Why did you look to the left when you wanted to switch to the right lane?”

I hope he didn’t expect an answer.

Behind the wheel, downtown Montréal is a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare. Coming at you is an unruly mob of pedestrians. Cyclists and in-line skaters appear with the speed and force of missiles. Highway signs are inaccurate, hidden or placed where it’s impossible to obey them. The city is full of canyons, construction pits, potholes and dangerous point curves. Hairpins are reinforced with solid concrete. Ste-Catherine, one of the city’s main streets, is an extravaganza of cars, buses, pedestrians, construction behemoths, stegosaurus trucks, unicycles, stilts and every other form of human locomotion ever invented. It’s a driving school scare film come to life. I face all of this with Gestapo’s voice drilling into my ear. More cryptic questions, riddles without answers.

“Why did you swing wide like that?”

“Why did you slow down/speed up when you should have sped up/slowed down?”

Why is the sky blue? Is there a god? I never realized before taking driving lessons that my mind was so unfathomable. Driving is a Zenlike experience. Resisting is futile. You do have to learn how to let go and do all sorts of things that defy logic and anything you’ve learned about the world up until now. It’s like the new job, it’s like relocating to Calgary.

Summer deepened. The move seemed like a dream. Then in August an entire cast of characters emerged like suspects in a mystery novel, demanding paper work, signatures, transfers of impossible amounts of money. I couldn't keep them all straight: human resources counsellor, real estate agent Montréal, real estate agent Calgary, bankers Montréal and Calgary. I joked about imprinting my signature on a rubber stamp.

People were making the great exodus out of Windsor Station, depending on when their departments were guaranteed office space in the new location, and when they could take possession of their homes. I was one of the last people in my department to head out. By mid-August, the only people I saw in the station were office movers and workmen. Little notes had to be taped to office doors instructing couriers to areas where someone was still working and could receive a package. Every Thursday a huge North American van blocked traffic at the station's entrance, swallowing filing cabinets, desks, computer equipment, hundreds of plastic bins. I love this old station and having to see it emptied out was devastating.

A red and white For Sale sign was planted on our front yard, making me think of the flag the Americans planted on the moon. I couldn't look out the window without being reminded that our property had become a possession of CP. Our cats, Boris and Natasha, could sniff out real estate agents almost as expertly as they detect vets. When DH from Royal LePage came over for a consultation, Natasha crouched in front of him and stared at him with huge reproachful eyes. Reproach soon turned into full-fledged "j'accuse." Finally DH raised his hands and said, "It's not my fault!" Both cats followed DH all over the house, Natasha as envoy, Boris settling into his role of back-up goon stationed a few feet behind her.

The house was on sale at a bargain relocation price and people slowed down and gawked as if it were a tourist site. They rolled down their car windows and asked, "Is this a relocation house?" Another company, Zellers, was also transferring their employees, to Mississauga and our neighbourhood was flooded with relocation houses. One woman tugged on her partner's arm and said, "It's a Cheapie Rail!" Gardening or mowing the lawn became a public performance.

I helped my partner move into a Montréal apartment, newly rented for the move and separation. We tested email communication packages. My one person, one-way airline ticket arrived at work and I ducked out of the office for a fifteen minute cry. I also cried on the Metro, in my favourite croissanterie, at the Old Port and everywhere. These tears came and went like the fabled chinooks of Calgary.

Saying goodbye became a ritual. I met a group of CP women for dinner at a Greek restaurant where we toasted each other. Some of us were going to Calgary, some staying in Montréal, others leaving the company; all of us facing life changes. IB and I went on a boat cruise on the St. Lawrence, something I had never done in my years in Montréal. The skyline was dove-coloured and illusory and the water swelled around us. We passed Île Ste-Hélène, its details fading in the evening light. The city belonged to the river and the world was a reflection, a dream a memory. The air cooled as we reached open water. IN and I sat on deck and we could have been on an ocean liner, two war brides in filmy dresses, leaving behind all we had ever known while below, the band played on.

5

On August 22nd packers assigned by the company arrived. Although F and I have moved many times we never had packers and movers to do it for us. It may spare a lot of physical work but it also made me feel as if I had no control over my live. When I saw the packers having a break in the back of their van I invited them inside for coffee but they weren't allowed to come in. Once again I had the feeling I had accepted more than a job offer. I had chosen sides. I wanted to explain to them I was a working class kid who had never been moved by a company in my life, but every time they handed me a waiver to sigh I realized that wasn't possible. These people weren't buddies helping us pull a midnight move. They were professional relocation packers; I was the shipper. They carried on while I stood by, signed forms and watched work being done.

I realized how stupid I was when I was slapped with a report written by the packers. They misunderstood some jokes made by F and me. In an attempt to be "just folks" we joked about breaking items to claim on them later. I think I was the one who

said we had been doing it for years and that was how we furnished our house. One of the packers found a jar of change in the bedroom. He wasn't allowed to pack it so F said, "Hey, take it. We're not above bribery."

Our jokes came back to haunt us when the president of the moving company showed up on our doorstep with the report filed by the packers. "Shipper intends to break items and claim on them." "Shipper said he has been cheating the company this way for years." "Shipper was upset when I wouldn't pocket his money." The incident was straightened out very quickly. Obviously there were records to prove I couldn't have cheated any company for years. Although they laughed and smiled at our jokes the packers were covering their asses. Their livelihood was at stake.

Early the next morning we left F's apartment to go to the house. I had expected to see a fairly small North American truck outside the door. Our house wasn't exactly palatial. Instead, I was stunned by a forty-eight foot container bearing red and black lettering that said, "CP Rail Intermodal Freight Systems." It was a neighbourhood spectacle, blocking the street and hiding the house. As the house was stripped from top to bottom I felt bereft. I didn't even have an office to hide out in as that had been packed up earlier that week.

For the two weeks between the day my furniture disappeared into the container and my flight date I stayed at my partner's apartment. The best thing I can say is he was not there for me. He was relentlessly cheerful about my upcoming departure and I rattled around like a malingering guest. I spent a lot of time roaming around the city, half-wanting to visit friends and old haunts and half-wanting to avoid them because saying goodbye was devastating. I found it hard to accept that what I thought of as my life could dissolve in six months.



VI

Shaky Landing

1

I touched down in Calgary on September 3rd. The weather, which had been thirty degrees prior to my arrival, turned into a hard rain. And my taxi was hijacked. While paused at the first set of traffic lights after leaving the airport a woman wrenched the door open and flung herself in the seat beside me. She had been trying to grab a taxi all morning and she had had enough. “I can’t get a taxi because no one’ll pick me up,” she snapped. She was sharp-faced and wore a short white jacket that looked like a bath mat, legs bare under high white boots. The driver was as nervous as I was and he followed her orders. We meandered into a run-down little area of the city, nowhere near my destination, which was the downtown Best Western.

This area looked like a separate town that had been swallowed up by the larger city of Calgary. It was poor and rough with a “you have until sundown to get out of town” ambience. A main street featured a pawn shop, an Interfaith second-hand clothing store and a nasty-looking Mac’s. The woman got out at the gas station, sticking me with the bill. I didn’t argue the point. Eventually I made it to my hotel and when I requested a receipt from the driver for my expense account I wondered if the company bean-counters would demand to know why it cost me five times more than anyone else to get from the airport to the Best Western.

At the hotel I met up with a former Business Information client and four of us went out for dinner. My first days in Calgary were a lot like my first days at university. The fourteenth floor of the Best Western was a CP Railway dormitory. I formed temporary friendships and groups without having any idea if these tenuous early relationships would last. It was hard knowing how to act. Too friendly, I risked seeming desperate. Too cool, I risked cutting off a genuine connection. A four hour flight had turned me into an eighteen year-old again; gawky, excited, homesick, hopeful. There

was nothing familiar, no habit or routine, no friends to fall back on and nothing to filter the intensity of my moods which dipped and soared from moment to moment.

2

I entered the new CPR headquarters, Gulf Canada Square, like Dorothy entering the Emerald City. My mental map of Calgary had four points on it: house, bus, Gulf Canada Square, Best Western. Gulf Canada isn't old and enchanted like Windsor Station but if CP Railway had to be located in an office tower, this is the one it would choose. From the outside the building is a funhouse. There's nothing defined about its shape and it's difficult to get a sense of where it's precisely located.

The interior of the building is utterly disorienting with its wings and levels and banks of elevators, only some of which ascended to the twentieth floor. When I made it to my work location I saw the new open concept office design, a style I thought went by the wayside in the 1970s. People are grouped in pods, or snake pits, depending on who has ended up together. Passersby can peer at us as if we're zoo animals. I started wondering if people who were selected to go to Calgary were simply those who could fit into the work stations.

Any time I left my pod I ended up wandering in circles; no bread crumbs to lead me back to my ergonomic chair. The lay-out of the building and location of offices makes any direct, easy flow of communication between departments impossible. Once again my department was scattered between two floors, the fifth and the twentieth. People are locked into their own units and it is more difficult to meet employees from other areas of the railway. CP managed to find the 1996 Calgary equivalent to Windsor Station. The old fiefdoms, divisions and secrecy are back in the guise of the discredited open concept lay-out.

I also discovered that the office transfer from Montréal wasn't completely successful. My old computer was replaced by a giant monitor loaded with Windows '95, PageMaker, CorelDraw and Lotus Notes. Did I have any clue how to use any of these programs? Was there any training available? Basic instructions? These are rhetorical questions. My back-up tapes from Windsor Station never arrived and my paper files

disappeared when the cabinets were shuffled around. My monitor was possessed, images on screen undulating as if someone had dropped it in a bath tub. The company's computer experts were baffled. All anyone could tell me was, "Press the re-set button." "They" came and added Microsoft Office because I was on "the list." Around the corner four people stood at the printer looking for all the world like chimpanzees. Not many administrative employees made the move, plunging the company into computer existentialism: Beeping and Nothingness.

3

Meanwhile the giant CP Rail container had reappeared, reuniting me with my furniture. The movers were cheerful and competent and I could tell I had their sympathy because I was alone. I found that telling people I was a temp before getting the job offer got them on my side. I was no longer a head office yuppie but a "regular gal." I also discovered that, being a macho oil town, gender roles are pretty fixed in Calgary. Movers and service people understood temp work, and they understood it when I told them my choice was moving to Calgary or unemployment. Box after box poured into the house. I spent the entire day checking off packing numbers and trying as much as possible to direct the movers, but since the layout of the house is completely different from the old one I didn't know where to stow most of the rubble.

After the movers left I staggered down the hill to the only restaurant within walking distance. I sat down and it felt as if everyone was staring at me because I was alone. An oldies music station played "Fly Away" by John Denver and as soon as I heard the line, "In the whole world there's no one as lonely as she," I started to cry and ducked into the washroom so no one would call 911. Things resonate when you're truly alone. Everything looks too sharply defined.

The next day two unpackers, a mother/daughter pair, arrived. I've become very curious about the lives of people in the moving industry. For example, there are a lot more families and children involved than I would have imagined. The three of us mostly managed to wreak havoc, opening boxes at random, revealing just how bad the packing job was done in Montréal. Coat hangers and lightbulbs were wrapped in

protective paper while an old mirror was tossed into a box with no protection. The antique cabinet never got its promised crate and I shuddered when I saw it covered by two cardboard boxes taped together. One of the wardrobe boxes stuffed with clothes also contained a garden hose.

After the Calgary packers left I went for a walk. There's a Baptist church on my way to the bus stop, its lighted sign featuring a new God homily every week. This weeks inspirational slogan was, "Faith Not Faith." The streets are lined with decrepit vehicles the size of barns, plus the expected pick-up trucks and Trans Ams from the 1970s. There are two sides to the neighbourhood. The front is quiet with little stucco bungalows and yards while the back is a parallel world of gravel alleys, sheds and wooden fences that are at least five feet high. Properties are enclosed and I have to tramp through the backyard to take my garbage out. It seems strange that in the west, the land of "Don't Fence Me In," everything is fenced in. I wondered if these fences are a holdover from homestead days, when you needed fences for protection or to keep horses.

A pick-up truck often parks near my bedroom window and plays loud country western music. On my first night in a house full of boxes, imagining F having the time of his life in Montréal, I heard Hank Williams bawl you, "Your Cheatin' Heart." For some reason this cheered me up and I started laughing.

It took an entire afternoon to wrestle with the water bed. Eventually I heard water chugging into the mattress and while waiting for it to fill I worked on the house. My designated work room was a warehouse of book boxes, tables, lamps, things that had to be reassembled. I remembered the water bed. The mattress was full but lopsided and marshy. I had forgotten the most important thing about water beds: the mattress needs to be straightened constantly. IB and G rescued me. G helped me drain the mattress the I escaped the house to spend the night with them in Priddis, a hamlet outside Calgary near Kananaskis Country.

The drive was breath-taking. The city dropped back until the office towers stood in the distance like toys. New subdivisions appeared then yielded to ranches. The land was unknown and so was my future and I was awed by it. Light and colour in the sky changed continuously, my mind so open I couldn't think, only feel and receive. A cloud

appeared and a brand new light slanted into the valley. Light and sky were in collusion. Around the bed, mountains appeared. IB and G live in a cedar house surrounded by woods. They use bear-proof garbage cans and G intends to buy an air rifle to frighten off some of the wildlife. Nights are *dark*. I felt like I had gone on a long journey and was a million miles from Calgary, never mind home.

When I returned from this journey I re-filled the waterbed. The mattress still looked like a half-fallen soufflé but I could get sheets on it. Although the bed wasn't warm yet I slept on top of it wrapped in sheets and blankets. Moving upstairs from the basement was a rite of passage and the waterbed had never felt so good.

One night I got up at three in the morning with a headache and was groping for Tylenol when I heard a terrible racket that sounded like loud static. I opened the basement door and the noise sounded like a hurricane. My first reaction was to dive back into bed and pull the covers over my head but I crept down the stairs, shaking like the coward I am, to face this minotaur. The water heater had burst. I sloshed to the monster, saw a big valve and turned it, hoping I couldn't make anything worse. Luckily the flood stopped. I had to call my real estate agent the next day to figure out what to do since there was no one else I could call. The only people I knew were CP transferees and none of us had any contacts. It took me a week to carve up the sodden, stinky carpet with an Exacto knife and remove it piece by piece from the house. I eventually created a work room, and managed to move the large pieces of furniture by placing them on towels and blankets and tugging them around the house. Things were coming together.

My department continued churning out relocation reports consisting of fellow employees fawning over Calgary, pumped up with statistics culled from *The Calgary Herald*. But I found Calgary a hard place to be alone in. There is no street life and I don't mean in comparison to Montréal. At 6 o'clock people vanish off the streets as if an air raid siren sounds every afternoon at the same time. I've had to become assertive in restaurants, tired of being seated by the garbage disposal. I do find Calgary a sexist city full of macho oilmen and engineers. Although I had arranged everything before arriving, the banks were still forwarding my bills to my partner in Montréal. I also can't get Alberta Health Insurance for as long as he is out of the province.

Emotionally, physically and spiritually, things were rough. I was desperately homesick. I was broken and bruised from heaving boxes around. I lay in bed, terrified of the noises the house made, the creaks, pops, bangs and wheezes of the pipes. More than once I was convinced I heard someone breaking into the house and I thought of all the movers, unpackers and appliance services people who knew my situation. Never mind listening to country western music; I was ready to write the stuff.

VII

Getting a Life

1

Calgary received its first snow storm on October 1st and for the first time the house felt homey with a snowlight coming in through the living room window turning the floors into rivers. The lamps gave the house a warm, rich look and from all the windows I could see evergreens covered in snow. Later the lights flickered and I heard an eerie howl from my kitchen door. I hoped it was a dog, even a coyote or wolf, and not some type of banshee. I wondered if I should be taking charge of something.

Thanksgiving rolled around and I spent it with colleagues, figuring this was preferable to morosely gobbling a turkey sub. We were all transferees spending our first holiday in Calgary and it was a strange night. R, the host, played his father's old 78 rpm records. We started to dance and roister with each other, by ourselves, in a group. After one glass of wine too many I started longing for some normal human companionship, a good talk with a real friend. I couldn't get past the thought I would see this whole group again on Tuesday, reinstated in their pods, gazing into their monitors. Instead of crying I danced and I suspect most people in the room harboured similar feelings.

I survived my first birthday in Calgary, thought I was making out fine, adjusting quickly to my new life, until I bottomed out on Remembrance Day. I had no plans that day and felt myself drowning in loneliness. I got into my partner's car, even though I didn't yet have my licence, and decided to go to the airport and see if I could find a flight and go home. I turned the engine on, put it in reverse and then discovered I couldn't even back out of my own driveway. To be fair, it is a tricky one for experienced drivers with a double curve in it, but being stuck in my own driveway didn't improve my mood.

I went out with anyone who would let me tag along, collecting weird evenings in Calgary. I went on rescue missions for colleagues lost in the Palliser Hotel. I sang “Silhouette” with the president and CEO of CP Railway. I warbled Eagles, Beatles and World War II songs with various directors. I started one evening off at a honky tonk called Cowboy’s and finished it by gate-crashing a posh Nova Scotia society club called the Order of Good Cheer, again at the Palliser Hotel, where people dressed in powdered wigs and velveteen breeches circa New France. I danced 1970s disco at a place called Gargoyles that looked like the decayed mansion in “Sunset Boulevard.”

What was most interesting was exploring the city and seeing its western side. C and I went for dinner at a place called the Ranchman’s, to soak up some genuine Alberta ambiance. We arrived in the middle of a charity benefit, full of Calgary socialites. C and I bagged ourselves a slab of beef and sat down to watch the auction. The auctioneers babbled away in consumer glossolalia. Showgirls brought out the coveted objects as if they were fragments from the true cross. We discovered that the cowboy look is as stylized and as much a status symbol as tuxedos in the east. I wondered when and how western cowboy attire moved from the ranch to benefit auctions.

Women discreetly held their paddles close to their chests, while the men were much more flamboyant. If nothing else, Calgary has made me think a lot about differences between men and women. From a random sampling of CPR transferees, the men are by far more positive about Calgary and the move itself. The women I know are far more ambivalent and are having a harder time adjusting. There are men everywhere in this city. Even public transit is stuffed with men. The big ticket items at this auction were sports packages. Ski trips and hockey pilgrimages went for huge prices. Those who won were overjoyed as if they had accomplished something far beyond just bidding high.

When the auction ended, C and I lingered for the line dancing demonstration. I just don't get line dancing. I find it ritualistic and sexless. The women looked like the Stepford wives with big sprayed hair, Grand Ol' Opry hair. With eerily plastic smiles they executed their little gestures with no more sensuality than a gymnastics routine. The flipping of the skirts was timed to the nanosecond. The couples stepped in, out, back, forth. They rotated, heeled and toed, bowed and twirled like wind-up toys. There was no glimmer of attraction or even camaraderie among the couples. C, who has lived in Texas, said the demonstration was very American and that it was just like the fifties; wholesome but sexless. No wonder the 1960s erupted the way they did.

3

Another snow storm made it impossible for one of my colleagues, P, to return to her new home in Bragg Creek and she had to ask if she could spend the night at my place. She felt badly having to ask and I felt badly for only having an old couch in the basement to offer her. New relationships and situations are full of politics. There was no comfort zone with anyone, without feeling you had to pay back, negotiate or apologize. Living in the country and having to ask for help was a new experience for P. Inviting someone to my house, which didn't have a guest room set up or basic fixings for breakfast, was embarrassing for me.

P and I walked west, through deserted streets. The head offices disappeared so quickly it was as if they had never existed. Railway tracks were buried in snow. Just ahead, an old armoury building stood like a frozen castle and made me think of Windsor Station. Snow blurred the world and the city turned into a railway depot at the turn of the century. It was so easy to imagine being a settler, an immigrant, someone who had just disembarked from a CPR colonist train.

Calgary is still so close to its rural origins and beginnings as a CPR town, that on a night like this in the snow, just outside the downtown core, you can actually feel a little bit like a settler. In Montréal you can see the old factories and mercantile buildings. You can hear your footsteps on the cobblestone streets of Old Montreal, see the stately ships at the Old Port. The city is all colours and textures. You can see and touch the stone,

old wood, the iron staircases. In Calgary the same sensual cues don't exist. Yet I could so imagine being a settler, experiencing my first view of the encampment, my first glimpse of mountains, coping with the first harsh winter in a new land. I found this curious because unlike Montréal, there was nothing to see to trigger this response. Only a blur of snow, an onslaught of cold dry air on my face, the railway tracks and the armoury building at the end of the world.

4

If I were to give Calgary an age it would be nineteen, away from home for the first time, its future still ahead of it. This city doesn't have to answer to anyone especially not the east. It can keep the car out all night. It swaggers into bars, flashes its brand new ID and proceeds to drink too much. It doesn't know what it wants to be when it grows up. Calgary is also an immigrant city, shouting out to the rest of Canada: "Join us. We're the best. You'll love it here and never want to go back."

There is something irresistible about its energy and while at the Palliser Hotel I made a resolution. The Palliser is a sumptuous old CPR hotel with high ceilings, gilt-edged mirrors, polished marble, stately drawing room chairs with striped upholstery. I can also picture the Palliser in Gold Rush days, winking with rhinestone tie clips, sealskin coats, the rustling of crinoline skirts, peopled with bellboys, valets, maids, stillroom girls. While flushed with this vision of free enterprise and bravado I resolved to finish the process of getting my driver's licence.

I originally started with L, a driving school instructor IB had met in a parking lot. L was an excellent teacher but he disappeared on me before the driving exam. His phone and pager numbers were disconnected and his school wasn't listed in the phone book. I asked one of the registries to recommend a driving school. They did, I made an appointment, the instructor didn't show up.

Next place I called was Young Drivers of Canada because I had heard of them. I made the mistake of mentioning what happened with L. And just like that the man I was talking to lost all interest in teaching me how to drive. He demanded to know who L was and pressed for details about his driving school. Then he said ominously, "I want

to get my hands on him.” I got off the phone as quickly as possible, afraid I had ended up embroiled in a driving school cartel war. I pictured gangsters in dark alleys, machine guns in violin cases, tiny cars with driving school logos screeching through the city. Privatization definitely has its down side.

Finally I found the Alberta Motor Association and when I saw they were CAA approved I clung to them. I waited in the Gulf Canada Square lobby for a “Bill Nickel,” suspecting the name was an alias since he was involved with a Calgary driving school. No one showed up. I called the AMA from the lobby pay phone, listened to the muzak version of “You’re Having My Baby” until I was connected with someone from the alleged driving school. By this time I was stewing in bile. I said I was a CPR transferee and there were nine hundred of us with spouses and teenagers who might want driving lessons. Then I went off on a jag about the horrors of privatization. It was, of course, the magic acronym “CPR” and not my eloquence that got me transferred to the school’s director, who personally took over my file, refunded me for the missed appointment and gave me two free lessons.

The weather worsened. It was November and minus twenty-eight, the house sinking under snow. S, who transferred from Vancouver and was currently living in Bears paw, which was located well outside the city limits, didn’t make it into work and we didn’t know if he was on the way, overturned in the ditch or if his car started at all.

Morning broke. At those temperatures it would have to break. When I woke up it was minus thirty-two, not counting the wind chill. I packed some pemmican, munched on a bar of whale blubber and began the arduous expedition out of the house. I trod warily across an avalanche path while clinging to the north face of Fairmount Drive. A few caribou looked at me then resumed their shivering. A woolly mammoth dove into a fur coat store. There were no Sasquatches to be seen as they had all booked tickets to Florida but the abominable snowman was waving to me over cocktails. Luckily, the number ten dog sled team showed up, preventing frostbite.

As soon as the temperature soared above minus thirty I rescheduled another driving exam. The examiner took me through the circuit like an equestrian routine. I duly paused at the uncontrolled intersection, slowed down for the school zone. This driver’s ed car was high-strung and skittish and I couldn’t get into an easy rhythm. It

bucked, crunched and slit over the strata of ice on the streets. Calgary doesn't plough its residential streets and you would have to go on an archaeological dig to find pavement. I ended up committed four of the deadly sins of driving. I mounted the sidewalk while attempting to parallel park and turned right with a "No Right Turn" sign in front of me. I couldn't even remember the other two offences which bode well for my future as a driver.

We turned down a busy residential street, a normal section of the driving course. The speed limit rose and I carefully adjusted my speed. All of a sudden I was cut off by a police car, which stopped. The police car had to stop because it was blocked by an ambulance. A second vehicle loomed in my mirror. The street was a canyon due to snow banks. I glanced to the left and saw paramedics with a stretcher. On my right side a small child ran in front of the car. I wrenched to steering wheel, executed one and a half turns, went up over the curb and stopped on the sidewalk.

It turned out I had done the right thing, but the examiner couldn't pass me because of my previous sins. He wrote out all the things I had done right, though, in an extraordinary situation, and even admitted he hadn't seen the child. He especially praised me for the calm way I had handled the car. I returned to work, shaking and still licenceless, visions of collisions, hospitals, ambulances dancing through my head. I wondered if F would fly to Calgary for my funeral and how long it would take my workplace to notice my disappearance.

The next morning I hauled myself out of bed for more driving torture. By this point it was sheer stubbornness that moved me. The exam was a formality. I had a Class 5 Alberta driver's licence and there was only one thing to say to that: Yeee Hah! I got through my labours, slayed the nine-headed Hydra, cleaned out the Augean stables, made mince meat out of the monstrous man-eating birds of the Stympalion marshes for this little blue laminated card. Bonus: No more little Hitlers with clipboards. I was ready to slip on a sealskin coat and cruise past the Palliser flashing my new prospector wealth

On December 22, F arrived in Calgary for Christmas holidays. We hadn't seen each other since September and it was strange for him entering the house, surrounded by all of our stuff, tables, books, dishes etc, but in completely different surroundings. His apartment in Montréal is temporary and the Calgary address is his official "home address yet he had only seen this house once, briefly, a lifetime ago in June. I spent a lot of money this year because I wanted so much to show him how much I still cared and how welcome his visit was to me.

We had ourselves a merry little Christmas, the first year I could remember with no one to visit and no obligations. We worked on the house together, re-doing some of my extension cord creations and grounding electrical outlets. I now had someone with whom I could practice driving. I wanted to be the guide and show him favourite places in Calgary. I arranged an outing at P's, dinner with our real estate agents G and S, and a New Year's soiree at the River Café.

It was a frigid day but we went for a drive through the city. In Inglewood, the oldest neighbourhood in Calgary, the car slid into a maze of side streets and we ended up at the rail yards. A few lonely houses stood like windbreakers. Trucks pulled into a gas station and it felt as if we were in a desolate settlement somewhere far north. Ninth Avenue in Inglewood looks like a wild west main street right out of Klondike days. I could tell there are antique stores lining the street but I pictured old hotels, player pianos, saloons full of prospectors. I hoped Calgary would kindle F's imagination, make him feel more enthusiastic about moving.

This was why I took him to P's first winter rumble in Bragg Creek. I wasn't planning to go because I needed a rest from my colleagues, but F and I had cabin fever and we drove out to the Creek. Another strange situation. We all reminisced about Montréal, exchanged stories. F was excluded from most of the conversations because he wasn't yet "one of us." Though the relocation disrupted his life he hadn't crossed to the other side yet. We shared the same stories, company mementos, nostalgia for lives left behind, and many of the same impressions of Calgary. There was, and still is, an almost tribal "us and them" mentality and part of the reason for that was because the only people who truly understood us were other transferees.

While we were exchanging our stories F suddenly demanded to know what happened to a tiny glass trinket. This insulted me. I had seen all the furniture come in, had presided over a flood of stuff collected by two people, had washed, placed and set up every single item in the house. He, in front of my friends and colleagues, fixated on one tiny thing lost in a cross-country move. Later, I decided it was part of a relocation syndrome. Spouses, especially the men, have felt excluded and probably more powerless than they've ever been in their lives and I decided F was reacting to feeling like an outsider.

On the last night of F's visit we had a serious talk about our relationship. Rightly or wrongly I was left feeling he wasn't all that interested in continuing a relationship with me. I know he's been spending a lot of time with a "friend" in Montréal. The only thing I know now is that I'm not the same weepy wimp I was in September, crying fifty times a day because I was worried our marriage wouldn't last. I've discovered I'm as capable as anyone else at getting by. I hope our marriage survives and it's a gift to know that it's not because I'm too afraid to live alone. Parting again at the airport with so much left unresolved was one of the most painful moments of my life. To this day I'm not sure how I got the car back in its driveway.



VIII

The Deep Freeze

1

From the twentieth floor of the Gulf Canada building, the city of Calgary looked like the last human settlement on earth. I made my way through a topiary maze of work stations to my cubicle and pulled out a notebook as if it were the only thing anchoring me to earth. Early morning, still dark. Night lights studded the city, fierce as the last stars before reaching deep space. Smoke and steam hung in the sky creating an arctic Hades. A bone-white subdivision clung to the foothills. It was January. A cold front from the Yukon had seized Alberta and the Dakotas and the distant mountains looked like broken china.

Ice fog cauled the sleeping houses. I moved like a tin soldier through crystal darkness. Trees stood, ghostly, as if they had passed on to the next world leaving only their essences behind. Inside, the floors shone as relentlessly as the snow, walls uncanny with reflected light. I heaved a frozen garbage bag over the back fence because I didn't have time to dig out the gate. I wondered if I had finally reached the point of no return, if, for the first time in my life, I simply wouldn't be able to resurface.

I steeled myself for another night of gasping pipes, the keening of the furnace trying to make it through January. I circled the phone, wanting to touch it, pick up the receiver, but it had become a taboo object. When the phone did ring it sounded as if the call had been made twenty years ago and was only reaching me now. Besides, all I wanted to talk about was the drastic cold, the deserted streets, the arctic blue of the sky, and how I would have got on my hands and knees and crawled to Montréal if it meant having my old life back.

Monday morning the radios roared on and I crept out of bed as if trying to evolve to life on dry land, moving one step at a time to the dreamzone of work. Trying to convince myself it mattered, that anything mattered. Having provided some form of

service for most of my working life I felt adrift without that kind of structure and purpose. I no longer felt needed at work and I missed that almost as much as I missed F.

2

February 17: Family Day in Alberta. The CPR didn't take it as a holiday and I waited for my bus at the usual time. I watched the moon gradually fade into the lightening sky. No people, no traffic spurting up Fairmount Drive, no trucks tottering around on jacked-up wheels. The sun warmed, the curtain lifted but no bus loomed over the horizon. I talked with a woman who was also stranded by transit and was eventually joined by another woman who was from northern BC and thought Montréal was very far away and exotic. "The big city," she said disapprovingly. At this point I was sorely missing big city transit. Calgary is the fourth fastest growing city in the country but you'd never know it in this little southeast cloister. My neighbourhood is made up of people who have lived here for years. There's been no demographic shift yet, no influx of young couples and families as in Dorval.

I was feeling very much alone on a social level and wondered if some of that had to do with a deep division between the young head office professionals and the rural small-town people. In Calgary these lines are too divided for my comfort. People who share my level of education seem to work exclusively in professions, make more money than I do and live in areas I can't afford, "communities" with private, fenced-off lakes. Small-town friendliness is over-rated, meted out according to your willingness to conform and I was dismayed one day when a census taker showed up at the door, already knowing who I was. Yet urban, professional ghettos are also restricting, narrow-minded and so terribly sterile.

I also don't know what to make about Calgary's much vaunted volunteerism. It doesn't mitigate the city's drive toward privatization. Volunteers here are as aggressive as any small-time entrepreneur and there are legions of them, deployed in the plot to part me from as much money as possible. Artists, writers, plumbers, contractors, charitable workers and, of course, driving school instructors, all operate on the same level and I hear far more about fund-raising and markets than I do about craftsmanship.

Then there are the pyramid schemes, which abound here. Recently SM came to read my meter. Even these days this isn't a noteworthy event. But we started talking about corporate relocations and the economy in general. He worked as a fitness instructor for one of the oil companies, was laid off and started reading meters for a living. He then became involved in a second business. He invited me to a shareholders' meeting that was being held the next evening. It seemed odd but I was curious and decided to go. SM arrived punctually to pick me up. He was dressed in a suit, looking like a date from the early 1960s. This meeting was held at a place called the Red and White Club, and the parking lot was crammed when we pulled in.

It turned out that the company is a network distribution company for Amway products though I didn't find that out until the end of the evening. This information is kept well hidden at the beginning. It was a combination business meeting and Billy Graham rally, attended by the same people who go to evangelical revivals hoping for miracles, of finding a way to pull themselves out of the muck of their lives; clean and hopeful supplicants in business suits. A lot of slick hair, sketchy suits, poofy perms, outfits a little off-kilter with very brassy buttons; fantasies of what successful people look like.

SM guided me through the meeting, acting like a sponsor in an evangelical group leading someone to Christ. The speaker was of the motivational variety brimming with positive clichés, building up his current life to make it seem as if he had been a lowly wretch, a veritable wreck of a human being until he discovered the Company. He continually attacked his old working class occupation until I felt like standing up and defending construction contractors.

Inciting himself with his own eloquence he postured, preened, pranced back and forth, foaming at the mouth: CARS ... \$100,000 ... \$26,000 ... BE A WINNER ... I DID IT – YOU CAN DO IT TOO.” It was a consumer rave with middle class aspirations serving as ecstasy. The audience clung to their pews, wanting to be true believers. Dressed in business drag, facial expressions ranging from mildly skeptical to worshipful, many on the verge of rushing to the front to be saved, to MAKE LOTS OF MONEY and BE SECURE FOR LIFE.

The resemblance between Amway's tactics and evangelical Christianity was the thing that interested me the most. It employed the same searching language, the same conversion, sponsorship, witnessing style of recruitment. Win so many people for Christ; win so many people for Amway. There was also the same curious siege mentality, the assumption that friend and family would reject you for being part of the organization. Also present was a strong notion of personal transformation. The speaker described his former construction work exactly the way born-again Christians describe their lives before receiving Christ. All the sin-soaked days before finding IT – in this case, Amway.

As I waited for my bus, I figured the blend between business and evangelism was inevitable. The lack of job security is a strong hook and serves as a potent recruitment technique. It's also not surprising to venture into this sub-culture in Calgary, the land of free enterprise where everyone seems to do at least one other job on the side. This is a city where plumbers are also electricians, driving instructors double as roofers or dog washers and meter readers dream of becoming a Diamond in the Amway pantheon.

3

The job has done nothing to relieve me of my winter isolation and in fact, almost makes the Amway cult sound appealing. This is the most abstract, nebulous work situation I have ever experienced. For five days a week I live in air. Most of my life in Calgary is spent in the clouds with portions of the day spent chuting through elevators. Office buildings are linked by enclosed passageways above the ground, known as Plus Fifteens. They are bridges removed from the street that has become reserved for homeless people. My life is owned by the company, my presence in the office is capital therefore I am guarded by security eight hours a day.

My department is a strange little kingdom at the top of the building. Departments are connected by narrow doors with porthole windows. Going through one of these doors is like going through CS Lewis's wardrobe. One leads to the world of Legal Services, one to Business Information Services. In the "New Railway" there are no longer any technicians and most people are spending their time trying to outwit the new technology. D had File Manager installed on Windows '95. S filled in a special

request for WordPerfect because he didn't understand Word. J types label on an honest-to-god typewriter she brought with her from Windsor Station. It sits like a museum piece in her ergonomic work station, but it does the job.

The other day I saw someone trying to take the fax machine apart because he didn't understand his fax had gone to the machine's memory. The company's in-house communications program is incompatible with Windows. Some of us have been trained and set up on Lotus Notes, most of us haven't looked at it, and I don't even know why I have it. The LAN crashes all the time and I still haven't had my monitor problems fixed. None of us are computer specialists and there is simply no tech support. It seems this is an era of computer Darwinism.

The job is a soap bubble, as far out of touch with the earth as a space capsule. I come in and pretend to do fake work, teleporting from one floor to the other in an air-tight tube. I like spending my breaks in a café where I can look out on the street, and if I don't get a chance to go it feels as if the street, the earth itself, will become a distant memory.

I'm still trying to survive as a new person without stepping on too many land mines or getting sucked into a vortex of office politics that have nothing to do with me. I'll need a machete and more than a few talismans to cut through the murk of corporate relationships, the cynicism, ambivalence and paralyzed caution of people who have worked in one company for a long time. The central absurdity of the job is that I work in the communications department of a compulsively secretive company where the most innocuous copy is examined as if every letter is a cypher. Active verbs are hunted down and eliminated. The almost complete merging of business and social life, of bosses who discuss work at birthday parties, day-long strategy meetings, being a competent adult having to endure dress code edicts are all new to me.

IX

Reprieve

1

Reprieve has come. I saw a real chinook come in yesterday, a dense grey-blue cloud arcing over the mountains. A real-deal chinook is a warm, very powerful wind that swoops over the countryside. It's like being inside a Van Gogh painting, "The Starry Night," and feeling its delirious brush strokes. Once again I've bobbed back up to the surface.

There is something about Calgary that sustains my sense of adventure even when I'm at my lowest. Some of it is because it's so different. It's foreign to me in a way Europe isn't. It will take a long time before I can ever claim to know this city. The contrasts are very deep. There are the good ol' boys lurching around in pick-up trucks and 1970s Trans Ams, the Soldier Shop, the grim Christian academies, the Jehovah's Witnesses temple, the long line of dour anti-abortion demonstrators along Heritage Drive, the swastikas I found on 9th Avenue.

On the other hand my needs are easily met. There is an abundance of bookstores and cafés and I can get almost all of my favourite foods and journals. The art and theatre communities are flourishing. When you meet people who have originally come from farms and tiny rural hamlets you realize that the Alberta redneck is as rigid a stereotype as the bomb-throwing Péquiste. If I am at a crossroads so is the city of Calgary. It is on the brink of becoming a big city and the energy is brash. It's exciting to speculate on how it will change if it gets Expo 2005. As Calgary has changed my life, people like me will change the city. The clash between the head offices and the city's deep rural roots will inform Calgary the way language has informed Montréal.

And when the city gets me down there is solace in the amazing landscape. Every week day I ascend to the twentieth floor of Gulf Canada Square and am greeted by a magnificent view. It's impossible to feel bleak at the sight of so much open space and a band of mountains putting on a show. These mountains are different every morning. Some days they are dusted with snow and the light singles out individual peaks. Other days they are blue, bathed in a light so fluid and luminous it's as if the world has just been created. Yet other days they are wearing their peaked jester's hats, singing and doing a soft shoe shuffle across the sky.

I've learned that mountains change size, they sink into the ground in bad weather, they play all sorts of tricks. They follow you then drop back. They pontificate at you then they almost vanish until they're a ghostly tapestry barely distinguishable from the sky. I hope I never lose this wide open feeling, painful though it can be. Anything, good or bad, can happen how and I don't know from one moment to the next whether I'll be exhilarated, homesick, on the verge of tears or full of wonder. It's that sense of wonder I wouldn't miss for the world.

It's been six months now and neither starting the new job or going to Calgary have answered any of my questions. Will I find a niche in this city and come to love it as so many of my colleagues already have? Will I be doing meaningful work? Will my new department decide I'm a useless moron and fire me? Will I lose the next job lottery? How many of my friendships will stand the test of distance? Will my partner join me? If this were fiction I could make up my own ending. If this were a management article I could glibly blather on about change and the New Global Economy. But I don't have answers; I don't even have clues. All I know is there's a chinook wind stripping the streets to the bone, erasing all memory of winter and right now the only certainty I need is that I'm seeing this through. I've got to find out how it ends.

Lesley Battler

Calgary, Alberta, 1997

